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ABSTRACT

In order to achieve school finance reform at the state level, six levels of local and state educational and political responsibility must be involved. The six levels are educational leadership (local and state school executives), the executive and legislative branches of government, the state educational department, the teachers association, the state school administrators association, and the state school boards association. In exploring how to develop an organizational structure to facilitate positive state level school finance reform, four steps must be followed--analyze the necessary interface between educational and political leadership, examine the leadership and political roles of these two groups, identify informational requirements, and develop operational guidelines for presenting and utilizing data and information in a fashion usable by legislators. (Author/IRT)

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POLITICAL STRATEGIES FOR SCHOOL FINANCE REFORM *

by

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INTRODUCTION

We in educational finance--especially in college and university settings where we have access to enthusiastic students and instrumentation for critical research--tend to keep ourselves in a constant state of agitation about the need for educational finance reform. We excite ourselves in preparing for the legislative session and perhaps naively, come away disappointed over apparent slowness of progress in finance legislation.

In our leadership roles we tend to overlook the great American truism that "things take time." Throughout the history of school administration, thinkers have reminded each generation of developers and innovators that to be really successful we must first realize that the machinery of educational change grinds slowly, but exceedingly fine.

The decision-making process in education and government has been researched, refined and honed to a fine art.

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EA 008 360

But too often, unfortunately, only on paper. In fact, not unlike our counterparts in commerce and industry, we too often observe a high negative correlation between the seriousness of a challenge and the actual time spent in its resolution. School finance reform is no exception.

What then is the difficulty and what is the problem? Why can't our refined and research-proven school finance ideals be implemented? If we were supreme rulers of the world, we would implement finance reform overnight. The fact is we are not king; rather, we function within a vast and complicated political system where power politics and educational statesmanship often find themselves virtual strangers in legislative halls throughout America.

THE DECISION-MAKING PROCESS

Every school administration trainee that goes through graduate school commits to memory some proven process in decision-making; and upon graduation and entry into managerial leadership seems to promptly forget it!

By way of review, Kaufman[1] reminds us of one popular process in decision-making:

1. Identify the nature of the problem.
2. Determine solution requirements and alternatives.
3. Choose a solution strategy from alternatives.
4. Implement the solution strategy.
5. Determine performance effectiveness.

Kaufman[2] points out further that research and managerial tools are available to school executives for use in implementing these basic decision steps.

1. Needs assessment
2. Goal development and setting objectives (MBO)
3. Input-output analysis (PPBS)
4. Network development and analysis (PERT/CPM)
5. Testing and evaluation of outcomes

In the realm of school finance reform where does the breakdown in the decision process occur? Students of the problem see it at points 3 and 4--choosing solution strategies and implementing solution strategy. But, educational leaders (administrators, executives, researchers, or statesmen) are quick to point out that the problem does not rest with education alone. Rather it is a larger problem of interface between education, and the executive and legislative branches of government. Some believe there are additional overlays of involvement--the state education department (granted that the extent of state department activity varies among the states) and state education associations such as the teachers, administrators and school boards.

So, there are really six separate yet closely related groups involved in educational decision-making relative to

school finance. Additionally, each of the six entities have important sub-groups. These are shown in Figure 1.

FIGURE 1. EDUCATIONAL GROUPS ESPECIALLY INTERESTED IN SCHOOL FINANCE

I. Educational Leadership

- A. Local School Executives
- B. State School Executives
- C. National School Executives

II. Executive and Legislative Branches of Government

- A. Local
  1. Town Council and Staff
  2. City Council and Staff
  3. County Council and Staff
- B. State
  1. Governor's office and Staff
  2. Legislature and Staff
- C. National
  1. U.S. Office of Education
  2. Congress, Members and Staff

III. State Education Department

- A. State Department Staff
- B. State Board of Education

IV. Teachers Association

- A. Local
- B. State
- C. National

V. School Administrators Association

- A. State } Including related organizations
- B. National } for specialty area administrators

VI. School Boards Association

- A. State
- B. National

The fact that meaningful finance reform breaks down at the points of choosing alternative reform strategies and at implementing the chosen strategy solutions, the problem is complicated additionally by splintered leadership and resultant splintering of organizational direction, purpose and effectiveness. These contribute heavily to delay in achieving school finance reform effort.

INTERVENTION BY THE COURTS

Historically, courts have intervened often in educational matters. As to school finance issues, the state and Federal courts have rather consistently addressed questions of taxpayer equity--that is issues have centered on the taxpayer.[3] More recently, within the past decade, attention to finance questions has been focused on the recipient of tax efforts--the students. The argument has shifted from taxpayer equity to educational opportunity. In this second generation of legal inquiry plaintiffs have argued that educational opportunity should not be dependent upon the financial ability of the district in which they happen to reside.

From this litigation has emerged a third generation of cases addressing the extent to which the state should go in providing equalized educational opportunities. For example, should the state equalize opportunity for vocational and career education pursuits? Perhaps it should

address in greater detail education of the disadvantaged and education of the gifted. In grappling with these questions and their finance implications, some thinkers argue that the day may come when America will have 50 separate taxing units for education--one for each state. Others believe that if true equalization of opportunity is to be realized, there will be but one educational system and that local school districts and state school systems as they are recognized currently will become sub-districts of perhaps a single system at least in relation to financing.

Whichever direction these arguments lead, reality suggests that courts are impatient with splintered educational effort and that by default the courts are providing certain of the leadership required to effect school finance reform.

Two of the more prominent finance decisions handed down recently were from the Serrano and Rodriquez cases. In Serrano v. Priest[4] the California Supreme Court observed that a fiscally poor school district cannot by the very limitations of its taxing ability spend itself into the educational excellence it might desire for its students. If such an objective is to be achieved the state itself must respond to the challenge of the equal protection clause of the Fourteenth Amendment. The court went on to point out that wealth of a school district

alone is a suspect classification, that education is a fundamental interest of the state, and that the two do not mesh in California

In Rodriquez v. San Antonio Independent School District, the Federal District Court found that the Texas Constitution and statutes discriminated against school students on the basis of district wealth alone, rather than the wealth of the state as a whole; and held further that the plaintiff students had and were in fact being denied equal protection of law under the Fourteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution.

The U.S. Supreme Court heard the Rodriquez case on appeal and in a 5 to 4 decision placed the challenge of school finance on the shoulders of the state legislature. But at the same time warned that the need for school finance reform (tax system reform) is apparent and that the local property tax has been relied upon as a principal basis of school support for too long.[6]

LEVELS OF EDUCATIONAL AND POLITICAL RESPONSIBILITY

Given that the courts are loath to intervene in educational affairs, but at the same time are impatient with slowness of forward looking change in patterns and methodologies for financing education, the subject of political strategy for effecting school finance reform is timely.

Referring back to Figure 1, it is not surprising that educational leadership in the United States is splintered

on at least a half-dozen fronts and more if the reader considers both the executive and legislative roles of government.

Federal and National Organizational Interests in School Finance. The relatively inactive Federal input in school finance reform has been reinforced by the U.S. Supreme Court by its position in the Rodriquez case--that is, educational financing is principally a function of the various states. Therefore, if the national component is removed from Figure 1, the problem is somewhat simplified. The problem can be delimited further for purposes of this discussion by removing from the figure, the national organizations of teachers, school administrators, and school boards.

Local and State Interests in School Finance. Into the forseeable future, school finance reform effort will be aimed at achieving its most measurable and dramatic progress at the state level. But toachieve this objective a great deal of the necessary effort will need to be generated at the local educational and political level. By concentrating on only the local and state levels of educational and political responsibility, this discussion is facilitated as shown in Figure 2.

The problem now is to explore how to develop an organizational structure to facilitate positive state level school finance reform effort. It is a four part

Figure 2. Local and State Group Interests in School Finance Reform.

I. Educational Leadership

- A. Local School Executives
- B. State School Executives

II. Executive and Legislative Branches of Government

- A. Local
  - 1. Town Council and Staff
  - 2. City Council and Staff
  - 3. County Council and Staff
- B. State
  - 1. Governor's Office and Staff
  - 2. Legislature and Staff

III. State Education Department

- A. State Department Staff
- B. State Board of Education

IV. Teachers Association

- A. Local
- B. State

V. School Administrators Association (State)

VI. School Boards Association (State)

problem--first, to analyze the necessary interface between educational and political leadership; second, to examine the leadership and political roles of these two groups; third, to identify informational requirements; and fourth, to develop operational guidelines for presenting and utilizing data and information in a fashion usable by legislators.

EDUCATIONAL AND POLITICAL LEADERSHIP - LOCAL

The interface which should occur between educational and political leaders at the local level is conditioned somewhat on whether the school district is fiscally dependent upon or fiscally independent of the local governmental unit. In fiscally dependent districts the stage is set for developing a high level of political finesse at the local level. This is made possible (in fact required) because the appropriating agency--generally the city or county council--is by law and by fact a political body. The politically astute school superintendent is the superintendent who comes away from the council chambers each year with a budget approved and intact. There is a great deal of argument for and against fiscal dependence and fiscal independence, but these are beyond the scope of this discussion. Suffice it to say, however, that the trend seems to be that larger school districts tend to be fiscally dependent upon some other governmental agency.[7]

The successful superintendent of schools usually has considerable political finesse on three fronts--first, the school system staff is sensitive to informational needs of the board of education, the public and the appropriating agency; secondly, the public is organized in a fashion to bring decisive pressure for approval of programs for which its school board is requesting funding approval; and thirdly, the superintendent has developed

a unique skill in leading the board of education to unanimous approval of budget requests. Having these three characteristics, the local school system including its constituency represents a political wedge, with the superintendent at its peak, followed by the school system staff, then the board of education and finally the public--parents and patrons of the school system.

With a wedge of this magnitude the appropriating body--usually an elected city or county council can ill afford to fail to approve a school system budget. For seven years, the author was a facilities executive in a large fiscally dependent school district where use of this type of political power was quite commonplace and exceedingly successful. Even in smaller school districts or in fiscally independent districts, this same kind of political power can be utilized effectively in the name of good budgeting practices.

School finance reform begins at the local level and can quite effectively begin in the manner described above. Such action begins in the neighborhood and extends into the school system as a whole and finally throughout the political structure of the geographic area coterminous with the school district. In the final analysis, the leadership for developing a politically astute school system rests squarely upon the shoulders of its superintendent.

It is incumbent upon the superintendent to assess the political power structure of the school community; and it can be a relatively simple undertaking. Satterfield and Stewart, in discussing the problem, stated that identifying the power structure

> "can be accomplished by observing closely those in leadership roles among the various publics of a community and school system. Examples of various active publics include: the music public (band boosters), the cultural arts public (art, history and orchestra activities), the vocationally oriented public (vocational school advisory groups), the agricultural public (farm bureau, grange, vocational agriculture and agribusiness advisory groups), the basic education public (the 3 R's), the athletic public (athletic boosters club), union leaders, business (chamber of commerce), and the various service club leaders to name a few.
>
> If each of these areas of power interest is charted, a series of pyramids is formed. Each pyramid represents a school or community interest. At the peak of each pyramid is the person or persons who holds greatest authority within the organization. The researcher is well-advised to be cognizant of the fact that the individual at the peak of the pyramid is not necessarily an office holder in the organization. Often the power holder remains in the background, but nonetheless directs the major decisions of the organization.
>
> If those at the peaks of the power pyramids are identified, they are often the principal participants in decision-making relative to community-wide and educational priorities. These are the individuals with whom the school executive needs to establish a positive relationship. Often this relationship is established vicariously, yet effectively, through more visible school and community workers.
>
> By studying the organizational structure of the overall school community, the educational executive is provided with the names of recognized community leaders and decision-makers. These individuals almost always have an input into community-wide decisions affecting program and finance priorities." 8

Accordingly, these same people are involved in helping establish school budgetary priorities. As these are approved by

the board of education, the same individuals again have involvement in lobbying--formally and informally--for budgetary adoption by the appropriating agency. Again, it is noteworthy that the real decision-makers may not be the visible leaders of the various community power pyramids.[9] But at the same time they are active in the overall local political process ascending from the neighborhood or specific community group through the statewide political network. Local budgetary prioritizing represents a grass roots effort which can result ultimately in school finance reform.

EDUCATIONAL AND POLITICAL LEADERSHIP--STATE

The foregoing discussion of local educational and political leadership has direct implications for state level political decision-making with two important exceptions. First, the local superintendent cannot lead the effort; and second, the likelihood of partisan politics entering into the decision process is more prevalent at the state level than it is at the local level.

On this point, Johns and Morphet warn that "political decisions may be wise or unwise, beneficial or harmful, depending upon the purposes, facts, and factors that are taken into consideration and the influences that are operating. Unfortunately, both valid evidence and judgments of those who are best informed about education or school support have been ignored at times."[10]

Referring back to Figure 2, it appears that there are four groups equipped to work at the state level in effecting sound school finance decisions.

1. The state education department
2. The state teachers association
3. The state school administrators association
4. The state school boards association

Each of these groups is staffed with executive leadership capable of exerting political influence. The requirement for achieving this objective is simply one of being in contact with the state level peddlers of political influence. Contacts must necessarily cut across party lines. Legislative decision-makers are usually those who represent an informal inter-party power structure. However, it is likely that the educator who joins in partisan political activity may become entangled in courthouse level politics, while "the great need in educational leadership is to make professional opinion heard at the palace level of politics--that is, in the circles of interaction where the big policy decisions are given consideration."[11]

Historically and practically, the effectiveness of educational organizations including state education departments has been weakened by their own inter- and intra-jealousies and in-fighting. The writer hypothesizes that if this statement was researched the findings would show that when state educational organizations share similar goals about finance legislation the state's finance program is more exemplary than in those where splintered statewide educational leadership is found.

How then can the executive leadership of four major state agencies and/or organizations direct their respective efforts at the specific goal of effecting school finance reform? First, the organizations must interact with one another to share ideas, examine resources, develop finance policy and blend appropriate strategy plans into singular effort. Second, appropriate data must be collected. Third, legislative staff personnel must be involved. Fourth, legislators are presented data necessary to make good decisions, and grass root support is timed for release at the most politically opportune moment.

It is critically important that the leadership be cognizant of these four requirements and that they be respectors of the decision-making process as noted earlier. To effect finance reform over as few legislative sessions as possible requires as strict attention to the details of political decision-making as does the planning of a successful military attack in time of war.

INFORMATIONAL NEEDS

Assuming that problems are identified and alternative solutions have been examined, what is required to plan strategy and implement the solution at the legislative level?

First and foremost, information is required. Legislators are reluctant to act on what educational leaders "think"; rather legislators want to be made aware of what educators "know." The only way to provide this kind of leadership is by and through presentation of hard factual data.

The required data is gathered through carefully ordered management information systems. Defined, MIS means "an organized method of providing management with information needed for decisions, when it is needed, and in a form which aids understanding and stimulates action.[12]

To be workable, Hostrop states that "an information system designed to serve as an aid to management in operating, controlling, and for decisions and planning has two main features:

1. A data acquisition and storage system to maintain orderly records on variables important to the decision-making process and a convenient recall system to make information derived from the file accessible to the decision-maker.

2. A logical structure to identify what variables are to be maintained in the file, the computations to be made on these variables, and how the results of these computations are to be used in the decision process." [13]

On a state-wide basis, a computer is mandatory. If an influential organization does not have a computer or access to one, all applicable organizations can pool resources to gain computer accessibility.

NEED FOR STATE FINANCE CLEARING HOUSES

Realistically, it is difficult for organizations to develop common objectives and common strategies for goal

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• In this case, legislators would be the ultimate recipients of the data.

achievement. Because of this reality, it seems feasible for each state to organize a clearing house for school finance. Here all kinds of needed data could be assembled, stored, retrieved, analyzed and dissimirated as needed for use by legislators and legislative staffs in grappling with school finance legislation.

Methods for financing a state clearing house is beyond the scope of this discussion. Suffice it to say that financing could be either a legislative endeavor or preferably a joint effort by the various applicable state organizations such as those listed in Figure 2.

BASIC OPERATIONAL GUIDELINES

Notwithstanding whether finance effort radiates from a central clearing house or from individual state-wide educational agencies is not important to this discussion because operational guidelines are essentially the same. Specifically, these guidelines are that:

1. School finance reform begins with recognition of and respect for the decision-making process. It is essentially the same for any type of managerial or administratively oriented finance effort regardless of the political level at which it is aimed.

2. State level educational organizational leadership is splintered. This may account in some measure for court intervention into the realm of educational finance reform. Again, whether this is a cause is beside the point; the fact remains that courts should

not have to tend education's business. Through strong state organizational leadership interfaced with well-honed local support, legislators and legislative staffs will become educated to ask for and respect the various organizational inputs of data, especially if these data come from a single source.

3. Grass roots finance effort at the local school district budgetary level is a necessary prerequisite for developing the political support wedges for effecting financial reform at the state legislative level.

4. Unfortunately, it is not realistic for all educational organizations to form and lay plans to achieve common objectives relative to school finance reform. Conversely, it is difficult for a single organization to carry the whole burden. It is feasible to organize a state-wide school finance clearing house to collect, treat, and dissiminate data for use by educational leaders in working with legislative staffs and legislators concerning school finance.

Politics is a practical art, also it has been termed the science of compromise. Educators and legislators are practical people. Through organized effort, fair play, honesty and forthright leadership supported by hard data, school finance reform in America will continue to progress perhaps at an even more rapid rate than has been observed in the past.

-End-

FOOTNOTES

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